

BAPTIST HISTORY :

FROM THE

*FOUNDATION OF THE CHRISTIAN
CHURCH TO THE CLOSE OF THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.*

BY

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made to extend the administration of baptism in an unwarrantable manner. It is referred to by Tertullian in his tract, "*De Baptismo*," in terms of strong disapproval. Some persons had introduced children (not *infants*) to baptism, or advocated the administration of the ordinance to them. Tertullian indignantly reproves the practice. "Let them come," he says, "when they are taught to whom they may come; let them become Christians when they are able to know Christ. Why should this innocent age hasten to the remission of sins?"* Now, is it not obvious that Tertullian was entirely unacquainted with *infant*-baptism, and that this *children's* baptism, which then first began to be talked of, was regarded by him as an unauthorised innovation? The sign of the cross, the giving of milk and honey, and similar ceremonies, were comparatively small matters, trifling circumstances; they were uncalled-for additions to the ordinance, and were so far mischievous, but they did not change it. It was still connected with knowledge, and repentance, and faith. But the admission of children, if they were not old enough to repent and believe, would change the ordinance. It would dis sever it from those religious pre-requisites with which it had been hitherto uniformly associated. The Gentile or Jewish rites which had been added to it, tended to make it more imposing, and so attracted the notice of the weak-minded; but to allow children to be baptised, who were not subjects of repentance and faith, would be, in Tertullian's opinion, to revolutionise the institute altogether. We act more wisely, he remarked, in temporal matters; surely we ought not to admit to baptism

* *De Baptismo*, ch. xviii.

those whom we consider unfit to manage temporal affairs. So he argued.

The case is quite clear. Children (not *infants*, but probably children from six to ten years old) are first mentioned in connection with the ordinance at the beginning of the third century, and then with disapprobation. "Tertullian's opposition," the learned Chevalier Bunsen remarks, "is to the baptism of young, growing children; he does not say a word about new-born infants." *

Some writers have laboured hard to prove that Origen referred to infant-baptism in his writings, as a then existing fact, and that he assigned to it an Apostolic original. Origen was the most learned Christian of that age. He flourished from A.D. 203 to A.D. 254, and attained high repute, both as a teacher in the catechetical school of Alexandria, and as an author. But his references are to *child*-baptism, not to *infant*-baptism, and the difference between him and Tertullian is that the latter decidedly objected to the practice, while Origen spoke of it with approbation. How far, however, did that approbation extend? Only to the baptism of such children as were capable of instruction, and gave indications of personal piety; for he uniformly taught that "the benefit of baptism depended on the deliberate purpose of the baptised." His reply to an objection of Celsus expresses his views. That heathen writer, having stated that "intelligent and respectable persons" were invited to initiation in the heathen mysteries, proceeds thus:—"And now let us hear what persons the Christians invite. Whoever, they say, is a sinner, whoever is

* *Christianity and Mankind*, ii. 115.

unintelligent, whoever is a mere child, and, in short, whoever is a miserable and contemptible creature, the kingdom of God shall receive him." Origen answers him in the following manner:—"In reply to these accusations we say, it is one thing to invite those who are diseased in the soul to a healing, and it is another to invite the healthy to a knowledge and discernment of things more divine. And we, knowing the difference, first call men to be healed. We exhort sinners to come to the instruction that teaches them not to sin, and the unintelligent to come to that which produces in them understanding, *and the little children to rise in elevation of thought to the man*, and the miserable to come to a more fortunate state, or (what is more proper to say) a state of happiness. But when those of the exhorted that make progress show that they have been cleansed by the Word, and, as much as possible, have lived a better life, THEN we invite them to be initiated amongst us." *

Such children as Origen here describes would be "initiated," that is, baptised, by any Baptists in these days. If they have been "cleansed by the Word," what more can we require? Tertullian's objection seems to have arisen from the undue eagerness of some persons to hurry children to the baptismal water before they could fully understand and receive the truth. But neither of these fathers refers to infants. They ascribed influences to baptism which are nowhere mentioned in the New Testament. They used language implying that an outward ceremony produced an inward, spiritual effect. They taught the necessity of baptism in

* See *Christian Review*, April, 1854, containing an article by Dr. Ira Chase on the "Opinions of Origen respecting Baptism."

order to pardon and salvation. And yet they also maintained the necessity of repentance and faith; and therefore they demanded, that if young children were baptised they should not be admitted to the ordinance till they were "able to know Christ," and were "cleansed by the Word."

We have at length arrived at the origin of Infant Baptism. Its birth-place was a district of Northern Africa, one of the least enlightened portions of the earth in that age; the time, the middle of the third century; the occasion, certain unscriptural notions which had gradually gained prevalence respecting the design and efficacy of the baptismal rite. Having adverted to those extravagances in a former section, it is unnecessary to adduce further proof. But the reader can easily trace the progress of error. When believers, newly baptised, rejoiced in the forgiveness of sin, and exhibited satisfactory evidence of a regenerated state, men soon began to regard pardon and regeneration as the effects of baptism. Hence sprung the opinion of its necessity to salvation. That being admitted, the question of time came next under consideration. Was it not desirable to obtain pardon and regeneration at the earliest possible period? And besides, were not infants circumcised under the Jewish Law? These questions were in the mind of Fidus, a bishop of some place in Northern Africa. We can have no doubt as to his duty under such circumstances. He ought to have searched the New Testament, if he had one (we cannot be sure of it, for books were scarce and dear in those days), and inquired into the differences between the Old and the New Dispensations, the carnal and the spiritual Israel.

If he had carried on the inquiry fairly, his difficulties would have been removed without further reference. But he either did not or would not conduct the requisite investigation. Cyprian was at that time Bishop of Carthage, and was revered as a great authority in all Church affairs. Fidus wrote to Cyprian. Certain persons, he said, had advised the baptism of infants immediately after birth ; but he could not agree with them, and particularly for this reason, that whereas it was customary to receive the baptised with a brotherly kiss, a newly-born infant could not be so received, being treated as unclean for several days after its coming into the world. He thought it best, therefore, to wait till the eighth day, and to baptise the infant at the same time at which, under the law, it would have been circumcised. But he asked advice of Cyprian, who laid the case before a council which had assembled at Carthage, in the year 252, for the settlement of various ecclesiastical matters. Sixty-six bishops met on that occasion. The answer is given in a letter written by Cyprian, from which the following extract is taken :—

“None of us could agree to your opinion. On the contrary, it is the opinion of us all, that the mercy and grace of God must be refused to no human being, so soon as he is born ; for since our Lord says in His Gospel, ‘The Son of Man is not come to destroy men’s souls, but to save them,’ so everything that lies in our power must be done that no soul may be lost. As God has no respect of persons, so too He has no respect of age, offering Himself as a Father with equal freeness to all, that they may be enabled to obtain the heavenly grace. As to what you say, that the child in its first

days of its birth is not *clean* to the touch, and that each of us would shrink from kissing such an object, even this, in our opinion, ought to present no obstacles to the bestowment of heavenly grace ; for it is written, ‘To the pure all things are pure ;’ and none of us ought to revolt at that which God has condescended to create. Although the child be but just born, yet it is no such object that anyone ought to demur at kissing it to impart the divine grace and the salutation of peace, since each of us must be led, by his own religious sensibility, to think upon the creative hands of God, fresh from the completion of their work, which we kiss in the newly formed man when we take in our arms what God has made. As to the rest, if anything could prove a hindrance to men in the attainment of grace, much rather might those be hindered whose maturer years have involved them in heavy sins. But if even the chief of sinners, who have been exceedingly guilty before God, receive the forgiveness of sin on coming to the faith, and no one is precluded from baptism and from grace, how much less should the child be kept back, which, as it is but just born, cannot have sinned, but has only brought with it, by its descent from Adam, the infection of the old death ; and which may the more easily obtain the remission of sins, because the sins which are forgiven it are not its own, but those of another ?”*

This is a very misty theology. In fact, the religion of great numbers, in the third century, was a compound of Judaism and Paganism, with a slight seasoning of Christianity. Gaudy ceremonies were delighted in, and the strange power which had been ascribed to magical in-

* Labbe and Cossart, *Concil.* i. 742—744.

fluences, was transferred to the ordinances of the Gospel. The immersion in water, the eating of the bread, and the drinking of the wine, were associated in their minds, as producing causes, with spiritual transformations and blessings. The bodily act was substituted for the mental, and "faith was made void." I do not affirm that every professing Christian was enveloped in this darkness; but it is too evident that the views of the majority were confused, and that under the leadership of such men as Cyprian, the churches were fast drifting into dangerous notions.

Nevertheless, they were consistent in some things. They did not separate baptism from the Lord's Supper, as is done by all Pædobaptists in these times. They held that those who were entitled to the one, had an equal right to the other. When the infant had been plunged into the baptismal water, it was considered a member of the Church, and received the Lord's Supper. If it was too young to eat the bread, they poured the wine down its throat. This, too, originated in Northern Africa, and there only we find it, in the period now under notice.*

Another innovation is traced to the third century. I allude to *clinic* baptism, that is, the baptism of sick persons, confined to their beds. It was not baptism, properly so called, as they were only sprinkled with water, or had water poured on them. The reason alleged for this departure from Apostolic practice, was the necessity of baptism to the salvation of the soul, and the consequent danger of deferring it, lest the sick-

* Bingham's *Christian Antiquities*, book xii. chap. i. sect. 3, and book xv. chap. iv. sect. 7.

ness should terminate in death. Thus one error led to another. If those clinics recovered, they were not baptised afterwards; but they were not admitted to the ministry. Novatian, however, was an exception to this rule. He had been sprinkled or received a pouring on his bed, when his dissolution was hourly expected. After his recovery, his eminent qualifications for the ministry induced the churches to deviate from the established custom, and he was ordained. Subsequently, he took a high stand as a reformer.

We are now brought to the year 254, the date of Origen's death. The downward tendency is before us. Baptism, at first the voluntary act of a believer in Christ, has become, in numerous instances, the performance of a ceremony upon an unconscious infant. In all these cases the design of the Christian profession is subverted. Members are introduced into the churches who are necessarily destitute of the spiritual qualifications enumerated in the New Testament. It does not require the gift of prophecy to foretell the disastrous consequences. Religious declension was both the cause and the effect of the introduction of infant baptism. The cause, inasmuch as so great a change could not have taken place if the Christian mind had not previously lost a due sense of the spiritual nature of religion: the effect, since the unholy mixture arising from the new arrangement could not but prove injurious to the interests of piety. "What communion hath light with darkness?"

SECTION I.

The Catechumens—Progress of Infant Baptism—Delay of Baptism—Gregory Nazienzen—Chrysostom—Basil—Ephrem of Edessa—The Emperor Constantine—Immersion still the Mode.

THE statements made in former sections are abundantly confirmed by impartial divines and historians. One of the most learned men of the present day, the Chevalier Bunsen, formerly Prussian Ambassador in England, writes thus in his work entitled, “Christianity and Mankind.”

“The Apostolical Church made the school the connecting link between herself and the world. The object of this education was admission into the free society and brotherhood of the Christian community. The Church adhered rigidly to the principle as constituting the true purport of the baptism ordained by Christ, that no one can be a member of the communion of saints, but by *his own* free act and deed, his own solemn vow made in presence of the Church. It was with this understanding that the candidate for baptism was immersed in water, and admitted as a brother upon his confession of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. It is understood, therefore, in the exact sense (1 Pet. iii. 21), not as being a mere bodily purification, but as a vow made to God with a good conscience through faith in Jesus Christ. This vow was preceded by a confession of Christian faith made in the face of the Church, in which the catechumen expressed that faith in Christ,

and in the sufficiency of the salvation offered by Him. It was a vow to live for the time to come to God and for his neighbour, not to the world and for self; a vow of faith in his becoming a child of God, through the communion of his only-begotten Son, in the Holy Ghost; a vow of the most solemn kind, for life and for death. The keeping of this pledge was the condition of continuance in the Church; its infringement entailed repentance or excommunication. All Church discipline was based upon this voluntary pledge, and the responsibility thereby self-imposed. But how could such a vow be received without examination? How could such examination be passed without instruction and observation?

“As a general rule, the ancient Church fixed three years for this preparation, supposing the candidate, whether heathen or Jew, to be competent to receive it. With Christian children the condition was the same, except that the term of probation was curtailed according to circumstances. Pædobaptism in the more modern sense, meaning thereby the baptism of new-born infants with the vicarious promises of parents and other sponsors, *was utterly unknown to the early Church, not only down to the end of the second, but indeed to the middle of the third century.*”

The catechumen institution may be traced back to an early period—as far as the second century. At first, as we gather from the New Testament, converts were baptised as soon as they acknowledged Christ. Afterwards, it was judged expedient to prepare them for baptism by a course of instruction, generally extending, as Chevalier Bunsen states in the above-cited passage, to three years.

In the first ages they *experienced* Christianity, and then professed it. In after-times they *learned* Christianity, and that, in too many instances, was all; conversion and experience were unknown. But this catechumenical system was adapted to those only who were able to learn, and therefore excluded infants. Its very existence was incompatible with infant-baptism, and the consequence was that when the latter became general the former disappeared, or dwindled down to an unmeaning form. But in the period which is now before us the Catechumens were a distinct order. Certain persons, called Catechists, were appointed to instruct them. They occupied a separate place in Christian assemblies, and were required to withdraw before the celebration of the Lord's Supper, which they were not permitted to witness. From the Latin phrase used in dismissing the assembly, the whole service was called "*Missa*," from which the English word "Mass" is derived. There was the *Missa Catechumenorum*, or service of the Catechumens, and the *Missa Fidelium*, or service of the Faithful; the former comprising the reading of the Scriptures and the sermon; the latter, the Lord's Supper and the devotional exercises which preceded and accompanied it, denoting the fellowship of believers, to which class the Catechumens did not belong till after their baptism.

It is a very noticeable fact, that the baptismal service, as prescribed in the earliest liturgies, was prepared for Catechumens only. There was no provision for infants. Had infant-baptism been then in existence, the ecclesiastical arrangements would have recognised it, and there would have been a twofold service, as there is now

in the Church of England, one for infants and the other for "those of riper years."

I have called the period from A.D. 254 to A.D. 604 the "Transition Period," because, as far as baptism was concerned, and, indeed, in many other particulars which might be adduced, if needful, the ecclesiastical system was in a formative state. It was neither one thing nor the other, but a mixture of incongruities. The catechumenical arrangement was founded on the theory of baptism on a personal profession of faith, and so far accorded with the New Testament. But infant-baptism had sprung up in Northern Africa, and was gradually extending itself through the powerful influence of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, who wrote largely on the subject. His sheet-anchor in the argument was the supposed efficacy of baptism in removing the defilement of original sin. These two theories were in opposition to each other, for if all candidates for baptism were to become catechumens and receive preparatory instruction, infant-baptism had no place. Yet there it was, daily gaining ground. Augustine's authority gave it the advantage in the West; but in the East, the baptism of children from three to ten years of age, who could in some sort answer for themselves, lingered much longer. And great numbers followed the example of the Emperor Constantine, who deferred his baptism till the latest possible period, that all his sins might be washed away at once, as he, poor man, vainly imagined they would be, by the administration of the ordinance. Thus we find a great diversity of practice. There was infant-baptism spreading from North Africa—child-baptism prevalent in the East—catechumen-baptism, properly so

called, the ordinary mode of admitting converts—and procrastinated-baptism, including such cases as Constantine's. You see, then, that this period is rightly termed the "Transition Period."

Neander says, "It was still very far from being the case, especially in the Greek Church, that infant-baptism, although acknowledged to be necessary, was generally introduced into practice. Partly, the same mistaken notions which arose from confounding the thing represented by baptism with the outward rite, and which afterwards led to the over-valuation of infant-baptism, and partly, the frivolous tone of thinking, the indifference to all higher concerns, which characterised so many who had only exchanged the Pagan for a Christian outside,—all this together contributed to bring it about, that among the Christians of the East, infant-baptism, though acknowledged in theory to be necessary, yet entered *so rarely and with so much difficulty* into the Church-life during the first half of this period."*

"The baptism of infants," Gieseler observes, "did not become universal till after the death of Augustine."†

Had infant-baptism been universally regarded as a Divine ordinance, it would have been everywhere observed, and Christian parents would have been scrupulously heedful of their duty towards their children in this matter. But it was not so. Some of the best men of the time were children of pious parents, but were not baptised till they attained maturity. I say again, this could not have taken place if infant-baptism had been from the beginning regarded as an Apostolic institution. A few instances may be given.

* *History of the Church*, ii. 319. † *Ecclesiastical History*, ii. 47.

Gregory Nazianzen, Archbishop of Constantinople, who died in the year 389, and whose father was Bishop of Nazianzen, was not baptised till he was nearly thirty years old. He expressly intimated his disapproval of infant-baptism, in one of his public discourses, and advised that children should not be baptised till they were three years old or more, at which time they might be able to answer the questions proposed to candidates.*

Chrysostom, the golden-mouthed preacher, also Archbishop of Constantinople, and born of Christian parents, received baptism at the age of twenty-eight. He died in the year 407.

Basil of Cæsarea, though he could boast of Christian ancestry for several generations, was not baptised till he was twenty-seven years old. Addressing Catechumens, he says (A.D. 350), "Do you demur, and loiter, and put it off, when you have been *from a child* catechised in the Word? Are you not acquainted with the truth? *Having been always learning* it, are you not yet come to the knowledge of it? A seeker all your life long, a considerer till you are old? When will you become one of us?" Observe—"from a child catechised"—but baptism still delayed.†

Ephrem of Edessa, a learned writer of the Syriac Church (died A.D. 378), was born of parents who, as Alban Butler remarks, "were ennobled by the blood of martyrs in their family, and had themselves both confessed Christ before the persecutors, under Diocletian or his successors. They consecrated Ephrem to God from

* Ullmann's *Gregory of Nazianzen*, p. 27.

† "Oratio exhortatoria ad baptis," quoted in Wall's *History of Infant Baptism*, chap. xii.

his cradle, like another Samuel, but he was eighteen years old when he was baptised."* They would be called good Baptists in these times. They "consecrated" their child, that is, prayed for him, and trained him "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord;" but they did not think of his being baptised till he was a believer, which was not till he was "eighteen years old." Would they have acted thus, if infant-baptism had been the universal and binding practice of the Church?

Speaking of the Emperor Constantine, the infidel historian Gibbon says, "The example and reputation of Constantine seemed to countenance the delay of baptism. Future tyrants were encouraged to believe, that the innocent blood which they might shed in a long reign would instantly be washed away in the waters of regeneration; and the abuse of religion dangerously undermined the foundation of moral virtue."† The truth of the last observation is undeniable. All ecclesiastical history illustrates it. And there is no more melancholy confirmation than that which is afforded by the records of baptism. The figment of baptismal regeneration, one of the earliest corruptions of Christianity, was an outrage on morals and religion. It encouraged men in sin, and bolstered them up with a false hope, substituting the outward form for repentance, faith, and a changed heart and life. Infant-baptism, also, soon unfolded its injurious tendencies and effects. They will present themselves at every step of our future progress. It seems astonishing that so gross a perversion of Christianity should have acquired such a firm hold of men's

* *Lives of the Saints.* Art. "St. Ephrem."

† *Decline and Fall*, chap. xx.

minds. But it is among the things that are doomed, and the day is not far off.

With the sole exception of the clinics, already referred to, baptism still consisted in the immersion of the candidate, who was ordinarily divested of clothing. The same method was adopted for children as for adults. And the immersion was still commonly performed thrice.

The following passages are taken from Bingham's "Antiquities" (book xi. ch. xi).

"Cyril of Jerusalem" (died A.D. 386) "makes it an emblem of the Holy Ghost's effusion upon the Apostles ; for as he that goes down into the water and is baptised, is surrounded on all sides by the water, so the Apostles were baptised all over by the Spirit ; the water surrounds the body externally, but the Spirit incomprehensibly baptises the interior soul."

"So St. Ambrose" (died A.D. 396) "explains it. 'Thou wast asked, Dost thou believe in God the Father Almighty ? And didst thou answer, I believe ; and then thou wast immersed in water, that is, buried.'"

"St. Chrysostom" (died A.D. 407) "proves the resurrection from this practice ; 'for,' says he, 'Our being baptised and immersed into the water, and our rising again out of it, is a symbol of our descending into hell or the grave, and of our returning from thence.'"

"St. Jerome" (died A.D. 420) "makes this ceremony to be a symbol of the Unity as well as the Trinity. 'For,' says he, 'We are thrice dipped in the water, that the mystery of the Trinity may appear to be but one ; we are not baptised in the names of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but in one name, which is God.'"

"St. Augustine" (died A.D. 430) "tells us there was a

twofold mystery signified in this way of baptising. The trine immersion was both a symbol of the Holy Trinity, in Whose name we are baptised, and also a type of the Lord's burial, and of His resurrection on the third day from the dead. For we are buried with Christ by baptism, and rise again with Him by faith."

Leo the Great (died A.D. 461) says, "The trine immersion is an imitation of the three days' burial; and the rising again out of the water is an image of Christ rising from the grave."

Gregory the Great (died A.D. 604) wrote thus to Leander, Bishop of Seville:—"Concerning the three immersions in baptism, you have judged very truly already, that different rites and customs do not prejudice the Holy Church, whilst the unity of faith remains entire. The reason why we use three immersions at Rome is to signify the mystery of Christ's three days' burial, that whilst an infant is thrice lifted up out of the water the resurrection on the third day may be expressed thereby. But if anyone thinks this is rather done in regard to the Holy Trinity, a single immersion in baptism does no way prejudice that; for so long as the unity of substance is preserved in Three Persons, it is no harm whether a child be baptised with one immersion or three; because three immersions may represent the Trinity of Persons, and one immersion the Unity of the Godhead."

At first, baptism was administered in rivers, pools, baths, wherever a sufficient quantity of water could be conveniently obtained. In the fourth century, baptisteries began to be erected. These were large buildings, contiguous to the churches. There was usually but one

in a city, attached to the bishop's or cathedral church. The baptistery proper, or font, was in the centre of the building, and at the sides were numerous apartments for the accommodation of the candidates. Several of these baptisteries yet remain, and have been frequently described by travellers. The baptisteries at Rome (in the church of St. John Lateran), Ravenna, Florence, Pisa, and Parma may be particularly mentioned. The fonts in these baptisteries are from three to four feet deep, and of proportionate size. Of course they were intended for immersion.

SECTION II.

Christian Intolerance—Justinian's Law, enjoining Infant-Baptism—The Novatians—The Donatists—Pelagianism.

THE period now under consideration was marked by one "transition" which can never be sufficiently deplored. Hitherto, Christians had endured afflictions for the Lord's sake, and had willingly suffered the loss of all things rather than renounce the faith. But a change had taken place, involving a temptation which proved too powerful for many of them. When Constantine the Great declared for Christianity, he expected to stand in the same position towards that religion as he had before occupied with regard to Paganism. The Emperors were the high priests of Paganism, and the civil government had from time immemorial directed and controlled the religion of the country. Was not the same policy to be observed? Had Constantine examined the New Testament, the question would have been soon